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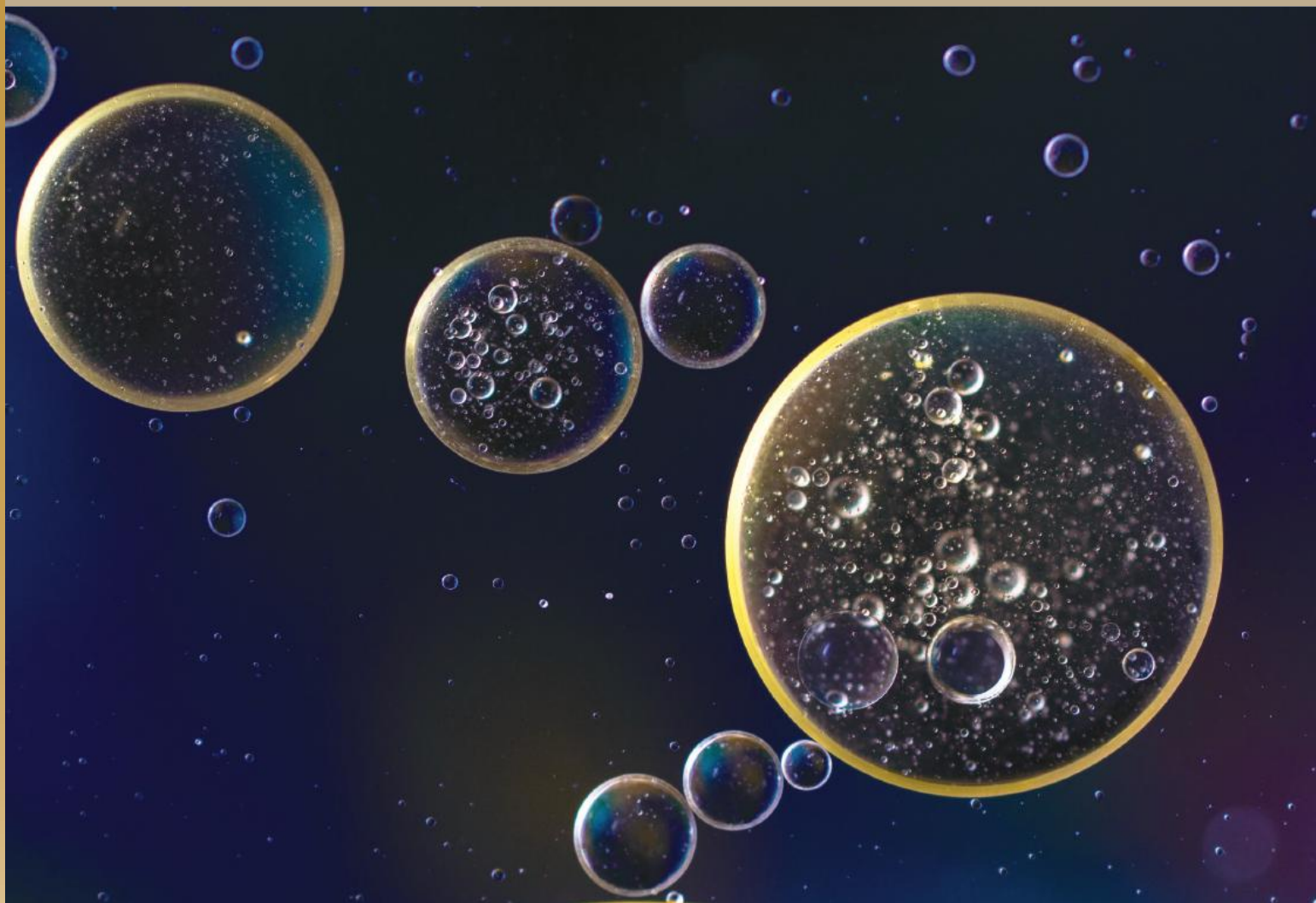
EXPLORING INDIA'S STRATEGIC FUTURES

By Arzan Tarapore



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PREFACE

U.S. policymakers are counting on India. In their official judgments, India has tantalizing potential as a counterbalance to China, even if its unreformed economy and frustrating bureaucratic foibles could make realizing that potential difficult. The country is secular and multiethnic, and its democracy has weathered challenges that have felled many lesser postcolonial states. Therefore, although India's capacity remains questionable, policymakers in Washington continue to believe that it shares a set of values and a vision for the region that make it a natural partner.

This NBR Special Report is designed to show that U.S. policymakers cannot assume the fixity of Indian strategic preferences. It presents a paper originally written under contract for the U.S. government in February 2019 and sketches three alternative futures of India as a strategic actor in the next two decades. These futures were conceived to be provocative, unlikely scenarios. But in just the eighteen months since the paper was drafted, events in India have prefigured all three scenarios, suggesting they are eminently plausible.

First, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, emboldened by its decisive re-election in May 2019, has accelerated its Hindu-nationalist agenda. Most significantly, this included the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special autonomous status in August 2019 and the concerted messaging from government and military leaders that India still claims the Pakistan-controlled portion of Kashmir. That messaging remains for now a diplomatic and narrative device, although it resonates alarmingly with this report's first scenario focused on a revisionist India.

Second, New Delhi has signaled a new appetite for taking strategic risks. It launched a provocative air strike against Pakistan in February 2019, in the very same week that the original paper was being finalized. Alongside the Indian Army's reorganization into integrated battle groups—designed to implement the offensive Cold Start doctrine—this portends an India that is more comfortable with risk-generation as a tool of statecraft, as envisioned in this report's second scenario.

Third, the ongoing border crisis with China—including a deadly skirmish at the Galwan River in June 2020—has already hardened Indian attitudes toward this rival. India has been engaged in its own form of strategic competition with China for decades, which has customarily featured the deliberate use of strategic ambiguity. But the current border crisis has energized many Indian voices calling for a firmer line against China, and it could in retrospect serve as the catalyst for more vigorous strategic rivalry, as described in the report's third scenario.

The original paper has been lightly edited to reflect these developments. None of this is to suggest that the far-fetched scenarios envisioned are now likely. But it should serve to underscore the warning to policymakers that India is not a static object. Just as policy should remain flexible enough to parry the thrusts of strategic rivals, it should also be alert to the evolving postures of the United States' strategic partners.

Arzan Tarapore
Sydney, Australia
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Exploring India's Strategic Futures

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report uses a novel alternative futures methodology to demonstrate that India's strategic preferences are not fixed but could vary discontinuously under different environmental conditions.

MAIN ARGUMENT

The method of major/minor trends developed in this report suggests that the roots of apparently surprising future behavior can be found in a close reading of a target state's history. Using this method, the report outlines three unlikely but plausible alternative futures of India as a strategic actor. The first scenario envisions India as a Hindu-nationalist revisionist power hostile to Pakistan but accommodating of China; in the second, it is a militarily risk-acceptant state that provokes dangerous crises with China; and in the third scenario, India is a staunch competitor to China that achieves some success through partnerships with other U.S. rivals like Russia and Iran. These scenarios are designed not to predict the future but to sensitize U.S. policymakers to possible strategic disruptions. They also serve to highlight risks and tensions in current policy.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The scenarios yield at least three major analytic insights that are relevant for today's policymakers:

- India will continue to face difficult trade-offs in managing security threats from Pakistan and China. A redoubled strategic focus on Pakistan will almost certainly come at the expense of Indian capacity to compete with China in the Indian Ocean region.
- A more confident and risk-acceptant Indian military may inadvertently pose strategic threats to the U.S. The U.S. may feel compelled to support India in future crises involving China; or even absent such a commitment trap, India-China crises are likely to jeopardize regional stability.
- To effectively compete with China, the U.S. must prioritize its interests and adversaries. Successful competition against China may require the U.S. to tolerate or even tacitly support other erstwhile rivals.

What kind of power will India be? The U.S. gaze has turned to India like never before, driven by two key factors. First, the strategic competition with China means that the United States recognizes the need to mobilize help from all of its potential partners. Second, India itself, albeit fitfully, is becoming a power of material consequence. Within years, the country went from being a part of "the most dangerous place in the world," as President Bill Clinton called South Asia, to being "indispensable" for global security and prosperity, as President Barack Obama put it.[1] For American strategists, the most common concern about India is whether it will fulfill its potential so that this "strategic bet" on India pays off. The United States has focused on accelerating India's growth and plugging the country into U.S. systems, concepts, and perhaps eventually plans. While U.S. observers commonly question its capabilities, U.S. officials declare that India will naturally complement U.S. strategy because of shared values—Indians speak English, practice a form of imperfect democracy, and have signed on enthusiastically to a vision for a "free and open Indo-Pacific." U.S. policy assumes Indian strategic preferences are stable and sees little risk that India might challenge U.S. security interests.

A close reading of history, however, suggests that India contains multitudes. The British economist Joan Robinson suggests that "whatever you can rightly say about India, the opposite is also true."[2] This is the peace-loving nation of Gandhi that did not flinch in using force to consolidate its control over Junagadh, Hyderabad, Kashmir, Goa, and Siachen; and it is the status quo power that used a war to split Pakistan in half. This is the "nonaligned" power that abjured the Cold War while signing a treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union; and it is the power that proclaimed its strategic autonomy while seeking the technological dividends of partnership with the United States. India's strategic futures will be just as contradictory and complex.

In this report, I identify another set of challenges for American strategists: aside from merely questionable capabilities, what happens if India's strategic preferences shift? I use a novel methodology to illustrate alternative futures of India as a strategic actor over the next two decades, focusing on futures that may pose an unforeseen challenge to U.S. security interests. This in no sense suggests that such futures are likely—they are decidedly unlikely—but U.S. strategists should consider them plausible. I analyze three scenarios: first, a revisionist India driven by Hindu-nationalist ideology, which may severely complicate U.S. efforts to counterbalance China; second, a risk-acceptant Indian military that engages in brinkmanship, which may endanger strategic stability with both Pakistan and China; and third, an India that expands its competition with China into continental Eurasia, making common cause with U.S. rivals such as Russia and Iran.

The Method of Major/Minor Trends

Alternative futures analysis offers a powerful tool to sensitize decision-makers to a range of possible futures. By generating hypothetical scenarios, with the explicit understanding that they are not necessarily the most likely, alternative futures can reveal possibilities that

[1] Jonathan Marcus, "The World's Most Dangerous Place?" BBC News, March 23, 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/687021.stm; and "Joint Statement by President Obama and Prime Minister Singh of India," White House, Office of the Press Secretary, November 8, 2010, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/08/joint-statement-president-obama-and-prime-minister-singh-india.

[2] Quoted by Amartya Sen, "Contrary India," *Economist*, November 18, 2005.

cognitive biases had earlier obscured.[3] There are several methods of alternative futures analysis. They generally involve a creative exercise of brainstorming, from which a futures analyst may inductively derive the key variables shaping the future and use combinations of those variables to generate differing scenarios. Some methods, such as "quadrant crunching," deliberately invert assumptions or assessments to generate counterintuitive outcomes or detect "unknown unknowns."[4] Regardless of the specific method, they generally rely on a creative process that hinges on imagination—thinking that is deliberately detached from empirical reality—and the structured generation of hypotheticals.

In contrast, the method of major/minor trends that I develop in this report is based on detailed historical analysis. The method is premised on the insight that future behavior—even surprising future behavior—does not spring from nowhere but rather evolves from observable past actions, preferences, and constraints. Every future scenario can trace its antecedents in a series of events, or a "trend." When a future is not very surprising—that is, only an incremental evolution from the past—it represents a continuation of the major trend of events, which is generally easily observed and understood through the orthodox narrative of events. When a future is surprising or unanticipated, it springs from the minor trend, which is characterized by exceptions to the major trend that do not fit the dominant pattern of behavior. Evidence of the minor trend may be dismissed and explained away by contemporaries as infrequent aberrations—a trend only in retrospect.[5]

Surprising futures occur when that minor trend is catalyzed into a new major trend. Under certain new environmental conditions—either some attributes of the actor or a completely exogenous shock—the actors in question follow new or newly salient incentives, adopting new patterns of behavior. The previously unusual becomes the new normal, yielding a surprising future or a paradigm shift. But the new dominant behavior always sprouts from a latent tendency—antecedent actions, preferences, or constraints. Likewise, every new major strain of behavior also accommodates its own exceptions. The new major trend comes with a new minor trend. Thus, the major and minor trends occur concurrently: the major trend is readily apparent even to casual observers and is the dominant narrative about a given issue. But the minor trend is also empirically observable to subject-matter experts who know where to look.

For example, for two decades after the end of the Cold War, the United States enjoyed a "unipolar moment." The major trend was defined by an apparent convergence among the great powers. From a more unified Europe to a chastised Russia and a still-developing China, countries bought in to the institutions and regional balances of the U.S.-led order, and conflicts were found only on the periphery, usually waged by irregular groups with postmodern grievances. But a minor trend was also emerging: Russia and especially China were preparing for revisionist challenges to U.S. primacy. They were undertaking military modernization and doctrinal innovations, which were largely dismissed by the major trend narrative as the marginal tinkering of second-rate powers; they continued to harbor irredentist claims on neighboring territories; they resisted the liberalizing influences of the U.S.-led system. Once catalyzed by the global financial

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[3] Peter Schwartz, *The Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain World* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1996).

[4] Richards J. Heuer Jr. and Randolph H. Person, *Structured Analytic Techniques for Intelligence Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2011).

[5] Several analysts have suggested that states' foreign policies can be understood as a product of several strategic approaches concurrently. One approach likely prevails at any given time, but the others are never completely relinquished. On the United States, see Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Knopf, 2001). On India, see Aparna Pande, *From Chanakya to Modi: The Evolution of India's Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2018).

crisis of 2008, the minor trend quickly became the major trend. Behaviors that were previously infrequent and ambiguous became the norm. In the second decade of the century, Russia and China had constructed nettlesome anti-access/area-denial strategies that posed serious dilemmas for U.S. military planners; they used subconventional coercion to assert sovereignty over adjacent territory; and they built political influence at the United States' expense, from the Middle East to Southeast Asia. Their shift in behavior was real—observers were not simply interpreting the same actions differently—but did not spring from nothing. It had antecedents that were clear in retrospect.

For the purposes of alternative futures analysis, the method of major/minor trends comprises four steps. First, using an expert knowledge of subject-matter history, the analyst identifies a key major trend. This is the target state's normal or orthodox strategic approach to an issue, as revealed by a consistent pattern of behavior over time. It is usually founded on a set of historical conditions, as well as preferences and constraints, particular to the target. Thus, in the example above the major trend could be described as Russian and Chinese strategic quietude. Both countries outwardly bought in to U.S.-led institutions like the G-8 and the World Trade Organization and opposed, but did not resist, the global expansion of U.S. military presence. This was based on the underlying historical conditions of their relative economic and military weaknesses.

Second, using the same expert knowledge of history, the analyst identifies a corresponding minor trend. This is a less clear pattern of exceptions to the norm, which may be infrequent and in each instance explained away as a contingency or aberration. The minor trend need not be the exact inverse of the major trend—such binaries are rare in international relations—but it usually involves a significant caveat, or a notably different approach, to the same issue. In the example above, the minor trend was Russian and Chinese military preparations, even while they temporarily acquiesced to U.S. primacy. Vladimir Putin and the Chinese Communist Party also consolidated their domestic power, with a watchful eye on the "color" revolutions and liberal globalization.

This selection of major and minor trends is the central interpretive task of the method. It requires not only a detailed knowledge of the target's historical record but also a social-scientific sensibility to understand the underlying causes of that record. As an alternative futures exercise, identifying major and minor trends is compelling because this method explains why a particular pattern of behavior is dominant, and accordingly why it may be displaced in the future. Russia and China muted their aggressiveness because they were temporarily enfeebled powers. However, they never abjured their anti-U.S. and expansionist impulses but instead quietly built their capabilities until they were ready to act.

Third, the analyst builds a future scenario in which the minor trend becomes the major trend, usually catalyzed by exogenous events or processes. The catalyst changes, or perhaps replaces, the original set of historical conditions—in some cases a group of political leaders or a domestic political consensus—that drove the major trend. The shift whereby the minor trend becomes the major is relatively rapid—a slow evolution would hold few surprises—and the target state in this scenario now has a new orthodox approach to the issue. In the example above, the scenario took shape after the 2008 global financial crisis following Russia's and China's period of consolidation. Both revisionist powers dropped the charade of buying in to the U.S.-led order and began to carve out their own exceptions to it. They militarily seized adjacent territories, defected from institutions

or launched their own, and projected their political power from Syria to the Philippines at the expense of the United States.

Finally, the analyst assesses the implications of that new approach for U.S. security interests. To complete the example of great-power competition, the United States now finds itself in the position of being plausibly contested in key geopolitical regions with no clear technological or doctrinal fixes. Declaring Russia and China to be revisionists, U.S. officials now acknowledge the urgent task of buttressing American power.

As with other forms of alternative futures analysis, this is an exercise not in prediction but in possibilities. Indeed, the method of major/minor trends deliberately eschews more likely scenarios; it does not pretend to offer a representative sample of alternative futures. Rather, by highlighting the minor trend that could be catalyzed into the major trend, it specifically searches for the less likely, disruptive futures. Minor trends may or may not become the dominant trend; there is certainly nothing inevitable about them. Most of the time, they are nothing but a series of exceptions to the rule that either continue to simmer marginally or dissipate over time. Japan, for example, never made a bid to challenge U.S. power, despite creeping fears of such a minor trend in the 1980s. It remained wedded to the major trend of being a stalwart U.S. ally. At the same time, to the untrained eye, the minor trend could be obscured in an oversimplified understanding of the target. Until relatively recently, most policymakers remained hopeful, if not convinced, that engaging China through liberal institutions would co-opt it and neutralize its expansionist preferences. The analytic task—that which requires subject-matter expertise—is the identification of relevant major trends whose corresponding minor trends of exceptions could, if catalyzed, severely disrupt U.S. interests. The value of the exercise, as in all alternative futures analysis, is to find the potential disruptors that may be unlikely but are nevertheless plausible.

In the following sections, I outline three such alternative Indian strategic futures. For each, I use the four-step process outlined above to show that India's unsure growth in power is not the only uncertainty that U.S. strategists must consider.

Scenario 1: The Restoration of Akhand Bharat

The first scenario considers a future in which India takes a revisionist turn. India has traditionally been a status quo power, using force primarily to defend its territory. On occasion, however, it has also consolidated its periphery and seized new land. In this scenario, an aggressive Hindu-nationalist political consensus drives India to press its claims against Pakistan in Kashmir, while accommodating China to maintain a quiet eastern front.

Major Trend: Preserving the Territorial Status Quo

India is a status quo power. It has no irredentist claims or expansionist ambitions to take new territory. Even though thousands of miles of its northern borders with both Pakistan and China are disputed, India would happily sanctify the de facto lines of control as the permanent boundary if it had assurances of the other sides' commitment. It is, fundamentally, a satisfied power. The threats to its north arise not from a frustrated desire to push its borders outward but from the fact that its borders are unsettled, with acquisitive rivals on the other side.

This status quo position has deep roots in Nehruvian conceptions of sovereignty.[6] Even before independence, the Indian National Congress began arguing that India with self-determination, freed of imperial "jealousies" and competition, would create a zone of stability in South Asia. With its demographic size and civilizational heft, India would be a self-evident great power, with no need to expand and conquer outward territories for the purposes of achieving greatness. Once the country was independent, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had a profound and remarkably enduring impact on Indian strategic preferences. He believed that sovereign self-determination was the foundation of international order. So for reasons of pragmatism, rather than only justice, he was a champion of recently decolonized states. The national sovereignty of states was sacrosanct, no matter their ideology or internal foibles. In this tradition, India saw territorial revisionism, efforts to export democracy, uninvited humanitarian interventions, regime change, and great-power spheres of influence as all being threats to national self-determination. This territorial conservatism became and remains a touchstone of Indian foreign and security policy. For Nehruvian India, territorial boundaries were the entitlement of independent statehood and could not be subject to bargaining—certainly not bargaining through force, and especially not for India, the presumptive core and leader of South Asia.

Territorial conservatism should not be mistaken for pacifism. Within the Nehruvian worldview, the corollary of a heightened respect for sovereign borders was the grudging acceptance of the role of military force.[7] Just weeks after independence, the formerly independent princely state of Kashmir was invaded by Pakistani irregulars. Kashmir's prince opted to join the Indian union, and in exchange Nehru rushed troops to defend it. This, the first of Pakistan's invasions, would end with a UN-brokered ceasefire that split Kashmir in two. For some years, Nehru was committed to a political solution such as a plebiscite to determine Kashmir's future. By 1954, however, Indian policy was that the Cease Fire Line (and the Line of Control after 1972) should be recognized as the formal and permanent border.[8]

There have been occasions when India hoped that diplomacy rather than fighting would secure its borders. Most notably, in the late 1950s, Nehru laid out a conciliatory approach to China, hoping that appeals to Panchsheel (the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence) would end the dispute between the two giants. But of course those hopes were summarily dashed when China made a bid to "settle accounts" in the 1962 war.[9] China proved its point when India was humiliated on the battlefield. In fact, that outcome was a formative experience for India's strategic outlook: trusting the good intentions of its rivals could only go so far, and military power was indispensable for maintaining the status quo. India would rearm significantly, almost doubling the size of its army in less than a decade.[10]

When Pakistan attacked again in 1965, India mounted a forceful defense. It not only expelled the Pakistani irregulars who had infiltrated Kashmir, but crossed over the Cease Fire Line to capture tactically valuable high ground and opened a new front, with a massive combined arms counteroffensive across the international border in Punjab. This conflict was especially instructive

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[6] Jawaharlal Nehru, "A Foreign Policy for India," in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru: First Series*, vol. 2, ed. Sarvepalli Gopal (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, 1974): 348–64; and Pratap Bhanu Mehta, "Still Under Nehru's Shadow? The Absence of Foreign Policy Frameworks in India," *India Review* 8, no. 3 (2009): 209–33.

[7] Srinath Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India: A Strategic History of the Nehru Years* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010).

[8] Mahesh Shankar, "Nehru's Legacy in Kashmir: Why a Plebiscite Never Happened," *India Review* 15, no. 1 (2016): 1–21.

[9] Bertil Lintner, *China's India War: Collision Course on the Roof of the World* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[10] Steven I. Wilkinson, *Army and Nation: The Military and Indian Democracy since Independence* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2015), 129.

about India's fidelity to the status quo because its forces had seized land across the Cease Fire Line in Kashmir that would have given India a more defensible boundary. Even with this opportunity to eke out territorial gains that would directly improve Indian security, India still chose to relinquish them for the sake of restoring the territorial *status quo ante*.[11]

In 1971, India was faced with a rapidly growing refugee emergency on its eastern border, as Pakistan cracked down on political opposition in what was then East Pakistan. India armed and trained anti-state local militants and prepared a conventional military attack. Once the war began, Indian forces swiftly invaded and seized Dacca, creating the new state of Bangladesh from East Pakistan. Despite cleaving Pakistan and holding some 90,000 prisoners of war, India studiously chose to forgo the opportunity to press a more punitive settlement in Kashmir. While Indian hawks derided the government's apparent lack of killer instinct, New Delhi instead hoped to cement the status quo of a split Kashmir into a permanent border.[12]

Pakistan was suitably chastised by its catastrophic loss but still had no interest in settling the border. After over a decade of hiatus, it ratcheted up an unconventional campaign in Kashmir from the late 1980s.[13] India responded to the insurgency with a heavy-handed security force presence and crackdown. Pakistan made one more military attempt in 1999 to seize a portion of Kashmir at Kargil. When these infiltrators were discovered, India rushed to expel them with ground and air forces. The two countries had become declared nuclear weapons states the year before, so India was careful to control escalation and accepted U.S. diplomatic mediation to end the conflict.[14] India was again unflinching in its use of force for defensive purposes.

Minor Trend: Forceful Consolidation of Territory

At the same time, the defense of the national homeland has prompted India to expand and enforce its territorial claims. This was particularly common in the years after partition, as the fledgling state sought to consolidate its territorial contiguity. As I noted above, it dispatched forces quickly to defend Kashmir from Pakistani invasion in 1947 and enforce the state's accession to the Indian union. In the same year, India deployed forces to assert its claims on Junagadh and Hyderabad, other princely states that Pakistan also claimed. Soon after, it deployed forces to seize the territories of Diu, Daman, and Goa in 1961, upon the end of Portuguese rule there. In all these cases, India was scrambling to gain control over territories whose status had been left unclear by the incomplete arrangements of partition or the legacy of colonial enclaves. Settling these uncertainties was not an exercise in revising established international borders, but it nevertheless involved the use of military force for the purposes of nation-building.

In subsequent decades, India moved twice to consolidate its control over its insecure northern periphery. First, it absorbed the state of Sikkim in 1975. Sikkim was a protectorate of India, sandwiched between India, Nepal, and China. When the state's leader threatened to assert greater independence, India's foreign intelligence service set about supporting a burgeoning democratic opposition movement. In the face of mounting civil disturbance, Sikkimese administrators invited

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[11] For an operational-level overview of the war, see S.N. Prasad and U.P. Thapliyal, *The India-Pakistan War of 1965: A History* (Dehra Dun: Natraj, 2011); and Harbakhsh Singh, *War Despatches: Indo-Pak Conflict 1965* (New Delhi: Lancer, 1991).

[12] See S.N. Prasad and U.P. Thapliyal, *The India-Pakistan War of 1971: A History* (Dehra Dun: Natraj, 2014); and J.F.R. Jacob, *Surrender at Dacca: Birth of a Nation* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2015).

[13] Praveen Swami, *India, Pakistan, and the Secret Jihad: The Covert War in Kashmir, 1947–2004* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).

[14] Peter R. Lavoy, ed., *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

the Indian Army to restore order, and a subsequent referendum found overwhelming support to join India.[15]

Second, India seized control of the Siachen Glacier in 1984. The glacier lay in barren, uninhabited land in northern Kashmir, undemarcated by the Cease Fire Line until 1972 or the Line of Control since then. As Pakistan began to assert de facto control over the area—for example, by issuing permits to foreign mountaineers—India began launching intermittent army patrols. Growing concerned that Pakistan was preparing to seize permanent control of the glacier, India acted first. Its troops occupied key features of the glacier in April 1985 and fended off several Pakistani attempts to dislodge them over the following years.[16]

In both cases of territorial expansion, India was concerned that the status quo was shifting and acted to preempt an impending loss of influence. Both offensives were led by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, an aggressive leader who was also at the helm during the decisive 1971 war. Since the days of Nehru, foreign and security policy in India has remained heavily concentrated in the office of the prime minister.

Even when India did not act to revise its borders, there was a domestic political constituency arguing for this option. After the wars in 1965 and 1971, for example, when India achieved its operational goals, opposition members of the parliament staunchly demanded that India retain or gain more territory in Kashmir. As the parliament was debating the Tashkent Agreement, which formalized the end of the 1965 war, members argued that India must retain the ground it had captured for tactical reasons in Kashmir—not for its military benefits but because it was constitutionally bound to do so. On this interpretation, the constitution defines the whole of Kashmir to be an Indian state, such that India is legally bound to acquire it, and certainly legally bound to not relinquish it once acquired in combat.[17] Similarly, as the parliament was debating the Simla Agreement, which formalized the end of the 1971 war, members argued that any negotiation with Pakistan over the status of Kashmir was a betrayal of India's long-standing claim over all Kashmir. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, a future prime minister, made an impassioned plea that the Pakistani occupation of part of Kashmir was illegal and that India should have leveraged its victory in Bangladesh to force Pakistan's withdrawal from Kashmir.[18] In both cases, the government faced stiff domestic pressure to extract more concessions from Pakistan, and there were sound political and military reasons to do so. However, the Nehruvian fidelity to the status quo held out. Unsurprisingly, these charges against the Nehruvian consensus were led by his Congress Party's political opponents, especially the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its Hindu-nationalist forerunners.

Fittingly, the most likely source of territorial revisionism in India is the political tradition of Hindu nationalism, or Hindutva.[19] The Hindu-nationalist strategic platform generally advocates a more muscular role for India in the world, complete with the martial cosplay of its grassroots members. Thus, Prime Minister Vajpayee ordered the 1998 nuclear tests, and successive leaders

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15 G.B.S. Sidhu, *Sikkim: Dawn of Democracy* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2018).

16 Nitin A. Gokhale, *Beyond NJ 9842: The Siachen Saga* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2014).

17 Parliament of India, *Lok Sabha Debates*, vol. L, no. 3 (New Delhi, February 16, 1966).

18 Parliament of India, *Lok Sabha Debates*, vol. XVII, no. 1 (New Delhi, July 31, 1972).

19 On Hindutva philosophy, see Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Christophe Jaffrelot, ed., *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Chris Ogden, *Gear Shift: Hindu Nationalism and the Evolution of Indian National Security* (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2010).

since have been keen to pragmatically build closer relations with the United States—both as a source of Indian power.

The most likely target of Hindu-nationalist revisionism is Pakistan. This is rooted in Hindutva's majoritarian communal agenda. It champions a view of nationalism that sees India—and indeed all South Asia—as a fundamentally Hindu entity, wherein minorities and "outsiders" are tolerated at the sufferance of Hindu hegemony. Hindu nationalists, therefore, long sought the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution, which granted special administrative autonomy to Kashmir. They hoped to see the Muslim-majority state economically and demographically assimilated into Hindu-majority India, with no special status. Prime Minister Modi suddenly announced the abrogation of Kashmir's autonomy in August 2019.

Some more extreme Hindutva elements reference the notion of Akhand Bharat, or "whole India," an expansive definition of the natural boundaries of a Hindu nation covering all South Asia. Successive BJP governments, under Vajpayee and Modi, have promoted the notion that India's status as a great power requires first and foremost preeminence in India's "neighborhood" of greater South Asia. Hindu nationalists embrace civilizational competition with China, although they have shown a grudging respect for China's rapid rise and a corresponding acknowledgment of the need to keep the competition manageable. It was, after all, the BJP's Vajpayee, then the minister of external affairs, who visited China in 1979 to normalize relations for the first time after the 1962 war. The Hindu nationalists reserve their greatest opprobrium for the Islamic enemy, both within and without—as the subversive "anti-national" minority in India and the inveterate foe in Pakistan. Against this enemy, seen as weak and venal, some Hindu nationalists would be more than willing to revise territorial boundaries.

Future Scenario: Hindu-Nationalist Revisionism against Pakistan

Prime Minister Yogi Adityanath has consolidated his domestic political power and is on the cusp of finally settling the score with Pakistan. He was appointed out of obscurity to be chief minister of Uttar Pradesh in 2017, and as the leader of India's largest state, he both rode and amplified a wave of communal disharmony, until becoming BJP leader and prime minister. He is a more unabashed Hindu chauvinist than his political mentor, Modi, inflaming a cycle of communal violence and giving open government license to the Hindu vigilantism that Modi had only tacitly allowed. He has also decried the ineffectual Indian response to Pakistan-based cross-border terrorism. Indian forces periodically launch limited strikes in retaliation, but the tit-for-tat attacks have not deterred Pakistan and its militant proxies.

With both communal tensions and cross-border violence reaching fever pitch, Prime Minister Adityanath is poised to make his mark on history. Flexing his muscles early in his prime ministership, he dispatched troops to restore order after civil unrest in Maldives, and then did not recall them. Instead, he coerced Malé to sign a pact declaring itself an Indian Ocean protectorate of India. His supporters cheer the steady restoration of Akhand Bharat. Most ambitiously, however, he plans to solve the Kashmir problem and restore greatness to the Hindu Rashtra (Hindu state) once and for all.

But first, he fancies himself to be a strategic thinker. For India to settle the score with Pakistan, it must keep the China front quiet. Prime Minister Adityanath also recognizes that his project of restoring Indian greatness requires continued economic growth, and a burgeoning trade and investment relationship with China is central to that objective. Beijing has sent signals that it is

similarly willing to distance itself from its "all-weather" ally Pakistan and has assured New Delhi that it will not provide military assistance in the event of an India-Pakistan conflict or exploit the opportunity for its own land grab on the China-India border. In return, India will accommodate China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Eurasia, encouraging and participating in Chinese financing and construction projects around the region and even inviting much-needed road and port infrastructure development in Kolkata. India and China restart the interminable process of talks on delineating their border, and India diverts the deployment of new Rafale aircraft from China-facing sectors to Pakistan-facing airfields.

Adityanath's new anti-Pakistan campaign operates on multiple fronts. Over the long term, India will apply pressure on the Pakistan Army by ratcheting up support for Baluch separatists in Pakistan and for rebels fighting the Pakistan-backed Taliban Emirate in Afghanistan. More directly, Indian forces will issue more disproportionate—but predictable—retribution for cross-border attacks, modeling themselves on the Israeli doctrine. With repeated raids and air strikes, always under the guise of retaliation, India's actions nevertheless call into question the inviolability of the Line of Control. Finally, India begins to plan for a major counteroffensive, suggesting that its forces are prepared to strike deeper, even to Muzaffarabad, the seat of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. Prime Minister Adityanath's firebrand rhetoric declares that, if sufficiently provoked, he is willing to deliver a *coup de grâce* against Pakistan's "illegal occupation" of Kashmir, even at the cost of a nuclear exchange. He is clear-eyed in his vision that the Hindu Rashtra will prevail, no matter the cost.

Implications for U.S. Defense

A revisionist turn in Indian policy would be hazardous for India-U.S. defense relations, but the revisionism imagined in this scenario would be worse because of its impact on India-China relations. Some members of the U.S. Congress and civil-society groups may urge that the United States slow security cooperation with India, given the Indian security forces' heavy-handed and provocative stance in Kashmir. But the India lobby would likely remain robust enough that defense relations persist, albeit with less enthusiastic growth.

More troubling, India's newfound conciliatory approach to China would greatly complicate U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific. After years of the United States encouraging India to expand its military presence in the region, on the assumption that it would naturally counterbalance the growing Chinese presence, a revisionist Pakistan-focused India would be narrowing its gaze back to its periphery. India simply lacks the resources to redouble its focus on Pakistan while simultaneously ratcheting up its competition against China in the region. A more aggressive stance on Pakistan, including the anticipation of general war, would force India to divert resources—especially scarce state-of-the-art technology—away from the border with China and the Indian Ocean. Over the longer term, procurements would reinforce the traditional interservice balance in the Indian military. The army would continue to claim the lion's share of budget allocations, reducing even further the scarce resources available for modernization or expansion of the capital-intensive navy. Thus, even if the Indian military maintains a robust precautionary presence on its border with China, it may not invest more there, and might even scale back its efforts to check China's growing regional presence.

This is especially true in the Indian Ocean region. If India redoubles its defense investments and activities to punish Pakistan, it would present China with another window of opportunity—not

unlike the United States' post–September 11 preoccupation with the counterterrorism campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. China would be building more oceangoing vessels and deploying them to the Indian Ocean at precisely the time when India loses interest in the region. The U.S. military, which invested its meager growth into reinforcing its position in East Asia, is in no position to hold back China's expansion into the Indian Ocean. The United States had relied on its partners—especially India—to counter China there. But an India committed to an ideologically driven territorial revisionism would in effect cede the Indian Ocean to China.

Diplomatically, as part of its accommodation with China, India may agree to step back from strategic coordination with the United States and other like-minded powers. Thus, after an initially hesitant approach, India would decisively end its participation in the Quad, or any number of other minilateral security arrangements, seeing less need to deepen engagement with partners like Japan and Australia. Such a wedge in the alignment of states balancing China would stand as a triumph of Chinese diplomacy.

More generally, a revisionist focus on Pakistan, at the cost of a wider focus on China's presence in the region, would have the effect of neutralizing India as a potential bulwark against China. Any accommodation between the two, as described in this scenario, would amount to a co-optation of India as an independent power center. Without India actively competing against China for influence in South and Central Asia and the Indian Ocean region, China could act across Eurasia with a freer hand. Posing an unprecedented threat of uniting the Eurasian landmass under its leadership, China would access vast economic resources and political influence to gain an advantage in its global strategic competition against the United States.

Scenario 2: Brinkmanship

The second scenario features an Indian military that embraces the risk of battlefield escalation. Indian forces have traditionally preferred to fight tightly circumscribed attrition campaigns. Occasionally, they have shown a willingness to escalate in crisis or war. In this scenario, long-delayed reforms make the Indian military unduly confident and risk-acceptant, raising the prospects of destabilizing arms races and crises.

Major Trend: Attrition and Risk Aversion

The Indian military has traditionally preferred to fight wars with set-piece attritional battles. It uses its advantages of mass and firepower to launch frontal confrontations against the enemy's concentrations of force. The army's aims are usually to degrade a quantum of the enemy's military capability or seize a chunk of its territory as a bargaining chip. This attritional mindset stands in contrast to the maneuverist or indirect method, which instead seeks to impose disruption and dislocation on the enemy, attacking its ability to function as a whole rather than its material power.[20]

The preference for cautious, attritional warfare is baked in to multiple levels of the political-military organization. At the highest level, most Indian leaders have been wary of escalation in war. In the first several decades of independence, this was driven by India's need to manage

[20] Richard E. Simpkin, *Race to the Swift: Thoughts on Twenty-First Century Warfare* (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1985); and B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Meridian, 1991).

relations with its rival neighbors. Indian leaders often prioritized friendly coexistence with China, or a hypothetical future amity with Pakistan, over a resolute deterrent posture. For example, after India captured tactically valuable territory in Kashmir in the 1965 war, it returned the land to Pakistan in the postwar peace talks for the sake of striking a highly prized no-war pact. India traded a credible defensive position on the ground for an incredible pledge by its inveterate rival.[21] After the 1998 nuclear tests, of course, this skepticism of escalation was rooted in nuclear deterrence.

In part, the preference for attrition is also rooted in the structure of civil-military relations. In the aftermath of the 1962 debacle, which Indians blamed in part on inappropriate political meddling, the Indian political leadership voluntarily dealt itself out of military planning, procurement, and operational matters.[22] The services—themselves jealously averse to joint command structures—are therefore left to manage military matters entirely without political direction. Insulated from any need to answer to policy requirements, the services procure and plan according to their own institutional biases. This takes the form of prestige acquisitions and offensive plans designed to triumph in operational-level fights rather than to achieve a tailored, politically directed coercive effect.

Within the military itself, the institutions are resistant to creative, unorthodox, or risk-taking behavior. Indian professional military education does not prize critical thinking or nonprescribed solutions. Mission command is out of reach—leaders issue directive orders and give little latitude to lower echelons for execution. These are, of course, mutually reinforcing maladies: commanders often cannot trust that their subordinates have the requisite skills and initiative to achieve objectives. It is, therefore, not a coincidence that Indian officers suffer such disproportionately high casualties in combat; they are reluctant to let soldiers do the soldiering. This reflects a broader organizational risk aversion—not to protect Indian soldiers, who have been lionized as martyrs but readily thrown into battle underequipped and under-led, but to protect Indian territory at all cost. The Indian military is loath to gamble with a gap in the defensive line or a flanking maneuver that leaves part of the front thinly defended.

In wartime practice, this has resulted in large set-piece battles that are costly but strategically inconclusive. The 1965 war saw India and Pakistan fighting the largest tank battles since World War II. India launched two corps of troops across the international border along a wide front. Its armored forces were distributed across the front rather than concentrated on key axes of advance. And these forces were hurled against Pakistan's greatest concentrations of armor in the Punjabi heartland, with the aim of degrading those Pakistani forces rather than maneuvering against any strategic targets. The Indian advance quickly ground to a stalemate and has even been admonished in the official history of the war.[23] Even if Indian forces had been more tactically adept, they would not have advanced far because the army leadership had predetermined a modest limit of advance. Out of a risk-averse concern for not poisoning future relations with Pakistan, India would not threaten any Pakistani cities or civilian infrastructure.[24]

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21 Arzan Tarapore, "Defence without Deterrence: India's Military Strategy in the 1965 War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (October 1, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1668274.

22 Srinath Raghavan, "Civil Military Relations in India: The China Crisis and After," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32, no. 1 (2009): 149–75; and Anit Mukherjee, *The Absent Dialogue: Civil-Military Relations and Military Effectiveness in India* (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2012).

23 Prasad and Thapliyal, *India-Pakistan War of 1971*.

24 J.N. Chaudhuri, *India's Problems of National Security in the Seventies* (New Delhi: United Services Institution of India, 1973).

India repeated many of these self-limiting combat practices in subsequent wars. When its Sri Lanka expedition in 1987–90 shifted from a peacekeeping operation to a counterinsurgency, its forces concentrated in population centers, ceding the jungle to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) insurgents. Forays into the jungle were conducted by large forces in linear sweeps, completely ineffectual in denying the enemy sanctuary.[25] In the 1999 Kargil War, Indian troops systematically fought peak by peak to dislodge the Pakistani infiltrators. Fighting in a newly nuclear South Asia, Indian decision-makers were mindful of avoiding escalation. Even close air support for infantry was diligently kept to airspace on the Indian side of the Line of Control. India would not abide the risks of striking against Pakistani rear areas.[26]

Short of war, this set-piece attrition approach to force limits India's coercive options. Facing a steady barrage of Pakistan-based terrorist attacks, the Indian military offers its decision-makers few viable options. The unwieldy mass mobilization of 2001–2, known as Operation Parakram, suggested that India faced an all-or-nothing predicament. It could either threaten general war—unthinkable with nuclear deterrence—or absorb the Pakistani attacks. So it absorbed several subsequent attacks, including the coordinated "26/11" terrorist attacks in Mumbai, with no realistic military response considered. In 2016 and 2019, the self-consciously bellicose Prime Minister Modi ordered cross-border reprisal attacks that achieved no strategic purpose except sating the public demand for enemy blood. Faced with no end to Pakistan's nonconventional campaign, India's military has equipped and postured itself to fight only conventional set-piece battles.

Minor Trend: Risky Maneuvers

On occasion, the Indian military has fought with panache. Its most celebrated victory was the rout of Pakistan in what was then East Pakistan in 1971. India's concept of operations for the conventional conflict was to concentrate on a few axes of advance to bypass Pakistani strongholds around the perimeter of East Pakistan and push toward what Indian commanders judged to be the center of gravity, the capital city of Dacca. This was a risky maneuver because the Dacca objective was selected only at the operational level. The political leadership was independently negotiating a diplomatic end to hostilities, and if it halted the campaign before Dacca was taken, the Indian forces would have been left having achieved negligible effects. At the time, New Delhi was also concerned that the USS *Enterprise* battle group, sailing into the Bay of Bengal, posed a threat. Thus, the Indian government thought it was also accepting the risk of a hostile U.S. intervention. As it happens, Indian forces raced to Dacca and compelled the surrender of all Pakistani forces—over 90,000 prisoners of war. It was a decisive strategic victory.

A second, often-overlooked aspect of India's 1971 campaign was its pre-war shaping operations. India assiduously shaped the battlefield before the war by arming, training, and sustaining guerrillas known as the Mukti Bahini, who waged a gradually escalating campaign of disruption and sabotage in the months leading to war. India also waged a vigorous information campaign, appealing for international help and holding the government of Pakistan responsible for the emergency and, by extension, India's response.[27] This episode was part of an Indian tradition of political violence against neighbors. Aside from the example of Sikkim noted earlier, India is widely conjectured to have lent support to Baluch separatists in Pakistan. National security adviser

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[25] S.C. Sardeshpande, *Assignment Jaffna* (New Delhi: Lancer, 1992).

[26] John H. Gill, "Military Operations in the Kargil Conflict," in Lavoy, *Asymmetric Warfare*, 105–7.

[27] Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

Ajit Doval, a career intelligence officer, has also made headlines for suggesting that India has and would be willing to use such unconventional means.[28]

India has also shown surprising daring in smaller military engagements. In 1988, with its army embroiled in the Sri Lanka counterinsurgency, India grew concerned by a coup attempt in Maldives. The embattled Maldivian president sent appeals for help to the United States, the United Kingdom, and India. Fearing an invited great-power intrusion into India's presumptive backyard, New Delhi quickly dispatched paratroopers, who seized control of the capital Malé, rounded up the coup plotters, and restored the president—all within a day.[29]

Around the same time, even without deploying, the Indian Army was engaged in significant competitive risk-taking actions. On the border with China, when India discovered a People's Liberation Army (PLA) incursion near Sumdorong Chu in summer 1986, it did not respond proportionately. Instead, the Indian Army airlifted an entire brigade to high ground nearby. Both sides mobilized larger forces, with the Indian Army also raising its readiness and urgently building roads near the border, until a diplomatic mission defused the crisis in May 1987.[30]

On its border with Pakistan, India in late 1986 launched the massive Brasstacks exercise, involving some nine divisions of troops. Pakistan responded in kind, positioning two strike corps at forward positions that posed a threat to Indian lines of communication to Kashmir. Both sides accepted the risk of moving additional forces out of garrison as a precaution, even though that was perceived as provocative by the other side. By early 1987, war appeared likely, but by the spring both sides had de-escalated and returned forces away from the border.[31]

Underpinning the Indian mobilizations facing both China and Pakistan was a set of reforms led by the army chief, General Krishnaswamy Sundarji. Aside from the exercises, the underlying organizational concepts were themselves designed to improve India's ability to rapidly mobilize and deploy strike forces. General Sundarji had greatly expanded the mechanization of the Indian Army. Based on the recommendations of the Krishna Rao Committee (1975), he developed new combined-arms divisions known as RAPIDs, designed to strike deep into Pakistani territory.[32] But the army's readiness shortcomings were evident with the slow mobilization of Operation Parakram in 2001–2. To address those weaknesses, the army devised its Cold Start doctrine, designed for a retaliatory strike into Pakistan on short notice.[33] The status and likely effectiveness of Cold Start had been perennially disputed, but the doctrine was propelled forward by the inauguration of integrated battle groups in 2019. These smaller, brigade-based formations are designed to mobilize quickly and launch rapid but shallow incursions across the border. After nearly two decades of inaction, they mark the most significant material implementation of Cold Start. Even if such reforms amount to little more than more efficient mobilization procedures, they nevertheless signal the possibility of an increasing acceptance of risk to ratchet up a future crisis.

This risk-taking behavior went from a hypothetical to reality in 2019. In response to a Pakistan-based terrorist attack, India launched an air strike at Balakot. By striking a target in undisputed

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28 Rahul Kanwal, "How Super Sleuth Ajit Doval Spooked Pakistan," *Daily O*, September 14, 2015.

29 Sushant Singh, *Mission Overseas: Daring Operations by the Indian Military* (New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2017).

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32 Vivek Chadha, "An Assessment of Organisational Change in the Indian Army," *Journal of Defence Studies* 9, no. 4 (2015): 21–48.

33 Walter C. Ladwig III, "A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army's New Limited War Doctrine," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2007/08): 158–90.

Pakistani territory rather than Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, and by using an air strike rather than a limited infantry raid, India signaled that it would no longer respect previous thresholds of restraint. It was deliberately generating risk. In so doing, it created tempting incentives for both sides to take even riskier action in the inevitable next crisis.[34]

Future Scenario: Provocations on Land and at Sea

The Indian military is under pressure to act decisively. A cycle of cross-border violence has gradually ratcheted up over the years. In response to Pakistan-based terrorism, the Indian military has launched increasingly escalatory retaliatory attacks, starting with the 2016 "surgical strike." Over the years, these Indian responses came to include standoff air strikes, massive artillery volleys, and more special forces raids. Each time, Pakistan took defensive measures or issued a feeble riposte, keen to de-escalate and content in the knowledge that its militant proxies would strike again before too long. The pattern was becoming well-established, but unsatisfying and increasingly politically costly for successive Indian governments. The public demands not just action but more action than last time.

India finally chooses to cross the threshold—first threatened in 2005 but never executed—of a conventional ground attack. Although none of the lower-level responses have deterred Pakistan, the chief of army staff notes that none have elicited an escalatory Pakistani response either. India can call Pakistan's bluff, he asserts. With the latest attack, India immediately initiates its Cold Start mobilization procedures. Integrated battle groups in the Thar Desert deploy out of garrison and take up defensive positions along the border, while one formation breaches the border and occupies two small Pakistani villages. As the Pakistan Army mobilizes and moves to engage, the swashbuckling Indian operational commander orders several other Indian formations across the border. A melee ensues. The Indian forces lack situational awareness and mission command, cannot coordinate supporting fires or close air support, and are all halted less than ten kilometers inside the Pakistani border. A Chinese-mediated ceasefire ends the conflict. The Indian press and political elites celebrate a famous victory. They had entered Pakistan and lost no Indian territory, and critically Pakistan did not retaliate with nuclear weapons. The Indian military had achieved little of operational value. The conflict was more useful for probing Pakistani reactions than for achieving any strategic goal, and its tactical performance was wanting. But for a vengeful public, this was a good start.

Acknowledging the operational shortcomings, a review commission follows with a raft of recommendations, which are all readily adopted. Finally, after decades of delay and multiple failed attempts, India has both a chief of defence staff and joint theater commands. New Delhi dithered on accepting U.S. logistical support during the Cold Start conflict, but given the lessons learned in combat, it has now opened its arms to greater security cooperation. India boasts an expanded and joint special operations force and permanent real-time intelligence cooperation with the United States. The new chief of defence staff and the organization he leads, having demonstrated that conflict with Pakistan was manageable and then enacting reforms, are once again confident in their capabilities.

Perhaps they are too confident. India is now emboldened to use the military instrument of power as never before. In particular, new enabling technologies and cooperation with the United

[34] Arzan Tarapore, "Balakot, Deterrence, and Risk: How This India-Pakistan Crisis Will Shape the Next," War on the Rocks, March 11, 2019.

States embolden the Indian leadership to generate military risk as a way to coerce adversaries. India now believes it has a range of new tools to use against China. Drawing inspiration from historical examples of its political warfare in Baluchistan and Sikkim, India begins to cultivate a greater intelligence network in Xinjiang and Tibet. Separately, breaching decades of convention, it instructs patrols along the Line of Actual Control to probe deeper into disputed territory. Given these provocations, another India-China border crisis is inevitable. An Indian patrol is surrounded and detained by Chinese troops.

In the midst of the border crisis, the Indian military assesses that added risk could break the standoff. The political leadership delegates all operational matters to the chief of defence staff, who is presumptuously confident of U.S. support and decides to escalate horizontally. As a PLA Navy flotilla passes through the Strait of Malacca, Indian forces on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands declare that the Chinese vessels have hostile intent and threaten to fire on them if they do not turn back. This time, China calls India's bluff.

Implications for U.S. Defense

A limited naval conflict between India and China in the Indian Ocean, adjacent to the Strait of Malacca, would disrupt global merchant traffic at a key chokepoint. A decisive Chinese victory that decimates the Indian military presence at the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, for example, would be a catastrophic material loss for India, which would take years to rebuild, allowing China unmonitored access to the Indian Ocean. Such a defeat would likely also underscore India's scarring memories of the 1962 loss, which would take even more years to fade. With a sharp blow to India in a limited conflict, China would clearly assert itself as the dominant rival and face one fewer obstacle to military dominance in Asia.

At the same time, the prospect of India absorbing China's ire and resources may appeal to some U.S. observers. To date, China's defense priorities have focused on its core objectives in the first and second island chains, from which it seeks to expel U.S. forces. In part, that may be a function of the absence of any other significant threats elsewhere. Although India's military capabilities are likely to remain modest compared to China's, a more aggressive and risk-acceptant Indian military may be able to compensate for capability shortfalls in posing a threat. Whether on the land border or in the Indian Ocean, an aggressive India would still pose serious strategic dilemmas that Chinese planners have not had to previously manage.

But such competition would not unfold in a vacuum: for the United States, it raises the risk of a commitment trap. With burgeoning U.S.-India security cooperation, U.S. credibility of a free global commons on the line, and the potential cost of a significant Chinese victory, the United States would be under pressure to act swiftly alongside India. U.S. strategy hinges on partnering with the Indian military—to plan and execute operations if possible—and resisting China's military expansion. This formula has been founded on a presumption of a relatively cautious Indian military, which the United States seeks to cultivate into a more assertive regional actor. If that assumption is flipped, and if the Indian military grows confident and aggressive, a sharper India-China competition may create awkward entanglements for U.S. forces.

As this scenario shows, Indian confidence may be founded on narrow escapes against Pakistan but would not necessarily translate to favorable odds against China. Compared with India, Chinese forces are far more advanced in their incorporation of C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) into military

modernization, and Beijing has shown itself to be more adept and bold in its strategic use of risk. What the Indian military learns in crises and conflicts against Pakistan may not carry over to its other fronts. Indeed, as this scenario shows, the security cooperation that the United States seeks to deepen with India may add materially to undue Indian confidence. Rather than effectively keeping the Chinese military in check, a more risk-acceptant India may paradoxically have the opposite effect. Stiffer security competition from India may hasten China's military expansion into the Indian Ocean, which Beijing currently considers peripheral. An India that takes bold military risks to offset its limited capabilities would pose a hazardous scenario to Washington, even if the United States were not directly involved in the resulting contingency.

Scenario 3: The Competition for Eurasia

The third scenario features an India that expands its field of competition with China to the interior of the Eurasian landmass. India's competition with China has generally been limited to the South and Southeast Asian littorals, and even then it has been lackluster. But India also has interests in Eurasia. In this scenario, it seeks to defend those interests by building deeper strategic partnerships with Iran and Russia.

Major Trend: Measured and Limited Competition with China

India has not mobilized for strategic competition with China. From the earliest days of independence, Prime Minister Nehru viewed China as a giant civilizational peer and a potential partner in the political and moral leadership of Asia. These hopes were embodied in the Panchsheel agreement of coexistence (1954) and the Bandung Conference of newly decolonized Asian and African states (1955). But they were under severe strain by the end of that decade, when the Dalai Lama fled from the Communists' crackdown to India in 1959, and completely erased by the 1962 border war. From then onward, China would be an inveterate rival for leadership of Asia.

However, India's approach to the strategic competition remains equivocal—measured in nature and limited in scope. This is primarily because of India's lack of relative power.[35] It embarked on economic reforms later, and enacted them less comprehensively, than China. Its weak institutional capacity and democratic political wrangling mean the power asymmetry may even keep growing. For New Delhi, strategic peace and expanding economic relations with China are key to building national power. Adopting a provocative stance against China's regional influence, which may disrupt bilateral relations, represents an unnecessary danger to that goal. The border dispute has traditionally carried relatively little domestic political salience—although the loss of Indian lives at the Galwan River standoff in June 2020 may change that—and certainly does not warrant jeopardizing those larger goals. These impulses are reciprocated in China, which also seeks to prioritize building national power, is satisfied with the relative balance of power, and sees no need to upset current trajectories with a superfluous conflict.

Similarly, to keep the competition manageable, India has been reluctant to bind itself too closely in perceived anti-China coalitions. The vestigial instinct for "strategic autonomy" creates

[35] T.V. Paul, ed., *The China-India Rivalry in the Globalization Era* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2018).

significant domestic political opposition to any proposals for closer relations.[36] This is especially true in the case of the United States, which generations of Indians were habituated to regard as the villain of the Cold War. But Indian governments have never let the principle of strategic autonomy stand in the way of pragmatic associations, from the civil nuclear deal to recently signed foundational military agreements. The real impediment to closer relations is New Delhi's impulse to control competition with China and to keep its powder dry in case it needs to send escalatory signals later. Recently, this has played out in India's cautious approach to the Quad. Compared to bilateral and even trilateral security cooperation, New Delhi has been more guarded in allowing the grouping to take on a military dimension.

The competition is also limited in scope. Of course, India remains acutely sensitive to the disputed border and China's threatening military modernization and has consistently tried to meet that threat, to the extent that its limited resources and inefficient military procedures allow. But India's response to the China challenge has only recently begun to widen its aperture beyond the border. This is a function of China's growing influence across Asia. BRI has sprawled across Eurasia and beyond, seeding Chinese economic and political influence in countries and waterways completely surrounding India.[37]

Much of India's anxiety about Chinese encroachment comes from its presumption of preeminence in South Asia. Chinese influence in Pakistan is something of a lost cause—the partnership reaches back decades and is part of the status quo. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, including the development of Gwadar Port, therefore only reinforces and updates the balance of power.[38] The greater affront to Indian power, however, is the encroachment of Chinese political influence among the smaller states of South Asia. For example, India traditionally regarded Bhutan and Nepal as little more than vassals or protectorates, buffers between Indian and Chinese power. Similarly, a key motivator for its regional military interventions in Sri Lanka and Maldives was the perceived need to keep extraregional military influence out.

To a considerable degree, the terms of that game have changed with BRI. The contest is no longer over direct intervention or security cooperation but longer-term economic and political partnerships. So India, in concert with new deep-pocketed partners like Japan, is scrambling to eke out some of that space, especially with infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia, to extend its commercial and cultural reach.

In the Indian Ocean littoral, India sees its national security directly under threat. Soon after independence, an Indian strategic theorist, K.M. Panikkar, advocated building "a steel ring" of sea and air bases on islands around the edge of the Indian Ocean—from Singapore to Socotra—behind which a strong Indian Navy could work toward sea control and ensure the security of the homeland.[39] This concept has persisted as a basic objective of Indian naval strategy. India has recently undertaken to develop ports at Sabang (Indonesia) and Sittwe (Myanmar) and secured access to Duqm (Oman). It exercises with Singapore, Australia, and other regional powers and has struck logistics-sharing agreements with the United States, Australia, and France.

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[36] Sunil Khilnani et al., *Nonalignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty-First Century* (New Delhi: Center for Policy Research, 2012).

[37] Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017).

[38] International Crisis Group, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and Risks," Asia Report, no. 297, June 29, 2018.

[39] K.M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Seapower on Indian History*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1951).

Still, India's oceangoing posture remains modest. The navy is still by far the smallest and least-resourced military service in India, shipbuilding is paltry in comparison with China, and India's rate of combined exercises with partners remains tentative even after a recent expansion. Despite its geographic advantages, India will likely struggle to retain its military advantages against China in the Indian Ocean.

Minor Trend: Interests and Incentives in Eurasia

BRI, however, is not limited to India's immediate periphery. Its ambitious sinews stretch to Western Europe and beyond. The initiative is a truly global organizing principle for China's engagement with the world, encompassing not only roads and ports but also information technology infrastructure and, through it all, economic and political influence. Its ultimate aim is to tie smaller states to China's preferences, bolster friendly leaders, and edge out Western influence. In that frame, BRI is pushing on an open door in Central Asia, a region marked by small economies and authoritarian impulses. The region's low base of economic development and integration means that China's investments appear comparatively generous and gain greater marginal influence than in more dynamic regions like Southeast Asia. And China has to contend with fewer competitors—the Eurasian interior lies largely beyond the horizon for Japanese, American, and European investors.

In addition to BRI, China has also begun to expand its security presence in Central Asia. The region abuts the restive region of Xinjiang, where Chinese authorities have not only escalated their repression of the Muslim Uighur minority but also sought to defend against the threat of Uighur militants. Central Asia is the conduit for militants and the threatening ideas of political Islam to reach China—against the soft underbelly of Communist Party control—from Afghanistan, Syria, and elsewhere. Thus, aside from its large and overt presence in Pakistan, China has also reportedly established a long-term security force presence in Afghanistan and Tajikistan and overlaid that with a new military counterterrorism cooperation forum.[40]

Notwithstanding China's vigorous contemporary activism, India boasts a long and rich history of cultural and economic ties to Central Asia. India's Mughal Empire began as an invasion from Central Asia, with its founder, Babur, born in the Fergana Valley. For centuries, northern India was part of an extended Indo-Persian cultural and linguistic sphere that stretched into Central Asia. The British played the "great game," seeking to extend their influence from India through buffers and protectorates against Russian encroachment, especially into Afghanistan.

Modern independent India also saw its security tied to Afghanistan, and through it, Central Asia. Keeping a hand in Afghanistan gave India a lever against Pakistan. In the 1990s, India backed the ethnically Tajik Northern Alliance against the Pakistan-backed Taliban.[41] It even established a military presence in Tajikistan to provide logistical and medical support. To this day, India sees Afghanistan as a critical field of competition with Pakistan. It has poured billions into development assistance to reinforce the Kabul government against the Taliban and weathered frequent Pakistan-backed terrorist attacks on its construction workers and consulates. And, in

[40] Joshua Kucera, "Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan Deepen 'Anti-Terror' Ties," Eurasianet, August 4, 2016.

[41] Avinash Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy: India in Afghanistan from the Soviet Invasion to the U.S. Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

preparing for a post–peace agreement Afghanistan in the future, India has begun to hedge its bets by cultivating quiet links to the Taliban.[42]

Diplomacy aside, India is boxed in by geography. It is not contiguous with Central Asia, so any physical, non-cyber connections to transmit Indian influence—whether roads, waterways, railways, or pipelines—would have to run through the impermeable barrier of Pakistan. Trade and security relations with Central Asia have thus been stunted. Recognizing this, India has set about building new transportation infrastructure that can bypass Pakistan. The keystone of the project is Chabahar port in Iran, where India built new infrastructure that greatly expands the port's capacity.[43] Chabahar is connected by road to Afghanistan, where Indian construction crews connected it to the Afghan Ring Road. In effect, this creates an India–Central Asia transportation corridor linking the Arabian Sea to Tajikistan. The corridor remains plagued not only with security concerns in Afghanistan but by regulatory and capacity constraints at every stage.[44]

Iran is also a critical link in an even grander Indian connectivity project, the International North-South Transport Corridor designed to connect Mumbai to Moscow. Using the ports of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas and railways through Iran and the Caucasus, the corridor would shorten and cheapen trade routes between India's and Russia's core economic and industrial areas.[45] Iran sits astride the Persian Gulf, the source of some 60% of Indian oil and gas imports,[46] and is home to some 9 million Indians who send back remittances.[47] After declaring a strategic partnership in 2002, India and Iran have held bilateral naval exercises and ship visits. They also frequently exchange views on counterterrorism, with thinly veiled references to Pakistani support of transnational militant networks.

India also has a long-standing, albeit now flagging, strategic partnership with Russia, the power that dominates the Eurasian interior. While professing nonalignment, India nevertheless signed a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union in 1971, on the eve of its major war with Pakistan, to offset the diplomatic support Pakistan was receiving from China and the United States. The relationship blossomed over the next two decades on a comprehensive commercial, scientific, and of course military basis. After the Cold War, the overall relationship shrank, but the military relationship remained on firm footing. Russia—unlike the United States—would readily part with sensitive technology, and the Indian military still remains heavily reliant on Russian equipment, maintenance, and spares.

India still sees Russia as a crucial counterweight to expanding Chinese influence in Eurasia. It is thus dismayed by tentative signs of Russia bandwagoning with China by endorsing BRI and courting Pakistan by engaging in military exercises in disputed Kashmiri territory. Thus, for India, agreements to transfer sophisticated weapons systems such as the S-400 air defense system, even in the face of U.S. disapproval, are only partly driven by operational considerations. They equally serve a key strategic purpose by reinforcing India's historical bonds with Russia and counteracting its drift into the Chinese orbit.[48] India is acutely aware that its attempts to limit or offset the spread

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42 Harsh V. Pant and Avinash Paliwal, "India's Afghan Dilemma Is Tougher Than Ever," *Foreign Policy*, February 19, 2019.

43 "India Takes Over Iran's Strategic Chabahar Port," RFE/RL, December 25, 2018.

44 C. Christine Fair, "The All-New Great Game," Firstpost, February 6, 2019.

45 Roshan Iyer, "Filling in the North-South Trade Corridor's Missing Links," *Diplomat*, February 28, 2018.

46 "India's Oil Import from Middle East Rises to 59%," Press Trust of India, April 25, 2016.

47 "With 16 Million, India Tops World in Number of Migrants Abroad," *Economic Times*, December 19, 2017.

48 Tanvi Madan, "Between a Cold War Ally and an Indo-Pacific Partner: India's U.S.-Russia Balancing Act," War on the Rocks, October 16, 2018.

of BRI to its north and west will be fruitless without having key partners like Russia and Iran on its side.

Future Scenario: Partnering with Rogues

The sheen has come off BRI. Within a few short years of its launch, the high-handed and corrupt "debt trap" practices had elicited a political backlash in several partner countries, including Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Malaysia. But that evidence was always weighed with the seductive short-term gains of massive investment and offset by shrewd Chinese policy adjustments. Now, however, the world has witnessed its first BRI civil war in Tajikistan. Public unrest over the Tajik president's kleptocratic mismanagement of a new national renewable energy grid, combined with underlying ethnic tensions, erupted into a renewed civil conflict. The war ended with Russian military intervention and mediation. In the postwar settlement, both Tajik sides have demanded the immediate expulsion of Chinese security forces, which earned universal opprobrium for their slaughter of local civilians while guarding Chinese facilities. Under international pressure, China agrees to close its People's Armed Police base and withdraw its workers.

The first war of anti-Chinese national liberation has concluded, and India, acting in concert with Russia and Iran, has helped fill the void. By the terms of the settlement, a consortium of Iranian and Indian companies will take over the former BRI energy grid. To enforce the peace agreement, Russia stations two motor rifle divisions in Tajikistan, and India deploys an air force squadron to Ayni Air Base. To rub salt into the wound, Russia and India establish a joint counterterrorism training academy and intelligence fusion center, both based in Dushanbe, to serve as the keystone of a region-wide effort.

At the same time, a moderate reformist Iranian government shakes off some of its revolutionary zeal and begins to self-consciously emphasize its Persian cultural credentials. It redoubles investment in language and cultural centers in Central Asia and incentivizes commercial joint ventures. With its treasury drained by years of war in the Levant, Iran is determined to expand its economic footprint in the region. India can provide much of the necessary technical expertise and investment capital to make this happen.

Beyond the new postwar initiative in Tajikistan, India also wins the contract to develop a new gas field in Turkmenistan, and the National Iranian Oil Company strikes a deal to transport that gas through Iranian territory to the Chabahar Free Trade Zone. This arrangement finally scuttles the long-troubled plans for the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline. Meanwhile, the Taliban Emirate in Afghanistan awards lithium- and gold-mining contracts to India, which also ships the minerals through Chabahar. Iran has established itself as the primary outlet for Central Asian energy and resources.

China remains the largest investor in the region. The other states simply cannot match its capacity. But with several new economic development projects, combinations of Indian-Iranian connectivity projects are offering viable alternatives for Central Asian states to resist Chinese influence and coercion. Moreover, with a firm base in Tajikistan, India-Russia security cooperation has displaced China's security presence, forcing the country to return to its borders, at least temporarily.

Implications for U.S. Defense

The United States would ordinarily welcome a more assertive India that contests China's growing influence. Indeed, India's geographic position on the Eurasian rimland allows it to act not only southward, in the Indian Ocean littoral, but also northward, into the Eurasian interior. But geography also poses challenges. India would only be able to contest Chinese influence in league with other major Eurasian powers, especially Russia and Iran. Such an Indian policy would be met with considerable chagrin among U.S. domestic audiences. How closely could Washington support a power that works arm in arm with sworn U.S. enemies in Moscow and Tehran? Can India be trusted if it so readily partners with revisionists like Russia and state sponsors of terrorism like Iran?

As this scenario illustrates, India has traditionally been—and will likely remain—very comfortable projecting strategic uncertainty, which may rankle Americans accustomed to definitive declarations of loyalty. Its approach to China will probably remain measured, so as to gain the benefits of cooperation and avoid the hazards of conflict. And India will certainly not allow U.S. preferences to dictate or veto its other strategic relationships—especially those with countries like Russia and Iran, which have firm historical and geographic foundations. Those other relationships may inject a degree of uncertainty into India's relations with the United States. But that uncertainty itself has its advantages: a potential but unrealized alliance with the United States is a potent point of leverage that India holds over China. New Delhi will not want to squander that leverage, and Washington will have to learn to work with that fluidity.

More pointedly, an India that works more closely with Iran and Russia would throw into sharp relief some of the internal contradictions in U.S. strategic preferences. In particular, the United States has declared open the era of great-power competition with both China and Russia, alongside its continued venomous antagonism toward Iran. But it may simply be impracticable to take on all adversaries at once. This scenario serves to illustrate the tensions in a global strategy that lacks prioritization.

The scenario also prompts Washington to more carefully consider its preferences in Central Asia itself. If the United States is serious about posing viable alternatives to BRI, it cannot ignore Eurasia, through which China plans to connect itself to Europe and where the security challenges associated with transnational terrorism and resource competition are real. U.S. options in Eurasia, however, are severely limited. China is rushing to fill a relative strategic vacuum in Central Asia, and if the United States wants to see China displaced, it must become comfortable with the alternatives—Russia and Iran. Alternatively, if Washington is intent on playing a competitive strategies game, inducing Beijing to bear a greater burden for security in Central Asia, it must consider whether such cost imposition would make a nontrivial impact on Chinese investments elsewhere, given China's enormous resource base.

Conclusion

The three scenarios I have outlined above are all grounded in very plausible political processes that have long existed in India, from communalism, to military adaptation, to the balancing of external threats. The contours of the scenarios may seem somewhat far-fetched. Indeed, as outgrowths of minor trends, they are by definition unlikely. Although they would depend on exogenous events or processes to emerge, these scenarios are given added potency by India's

steadily increasing national power and are all firmly rooted in existing features of the Indian state. India has done unlikely things in the past. The vivisection of Pakistan, the nuclear tests, and the civil nuclear deal with the United States were events that would have seemed just as far-fetched to observers two decades before they happened.

These scenarios are designed to sensitize U.S. strategists to possible futures, but they are useful policy-analysis tools even if those futures do not materialize. Some elements of the scenarios may emerge in partial or distorted form. For example, a future Hindu-nationalist government may prove more aggressive rather than accommodating to China. Even if the scenarios do not materialize at all, they still provide important policy implications for today's decision-makers. For example, the first scenario highlights the constant and ongoing trade-offs India faces in managing its Pakistan and China threats. Any shift or reallocation of Indian defense resources toward Pakistan is likely to come at the expense of India's capacity to compete with China. The second scenario reveals how a more confident and risk-acceptant Indian military may also carry strategic risks for the United States—not only in the form of a commitment trap but also in the form of regional instability, even if the United States is not directly involved in a military confrontation. The third scenario underscores the need for Washington to ruthlessly prioritize its interests and adversaries. Successful competition against China may require the United States to tolerate or even tacitly support other erstwhile rivals.

Scenarios analysis also provides important cues for future research. By illustrating plausible scenarios, this analysis suggests that the minor trends I have identified should be further explored and closely monitored. For example, to better understand the strategic proclivities of Hindu nationalists, analysts should examine the discourse—in English, Hindi, and local vernaculars—of the next generation of Hindutva leaders, exemplified by Yogi Adityanath. They should look, in particular, for suggestions of revisionist intent against Pakistan or in these leaders' approach to relations with China. These minor trends may remain minor, or they may fizzle out completely. But identifying such important but nonobvious trends has shown that, quite apart from valid questions about India's capabilities, the country's strategic preferences are also variable and must not be assumed to be constant.

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